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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction Report: Events in Gaza January 7,
2009

1. Sarkozy's Visit: All Syrian papers dedicated banner headlines to French President Sarkozy's meeting with President Asad and drew extensively from the SANA press release for the substance of their reporting.

While the Syrian press focused on President Assad's call for an immediate end to Israel's "barbaric aggression," and Syria's vision for a solution, the regional media and international wires focused on Sarkozy urging Assad to exert pressure on Hamas in order to listen to "the voice of reason and opt for reconciliation and peace."

"Pressure should be exerted on all parties involved, including Hamas, in order for the guns to fall silent and peace to return," Sarkozy said. "President Bashar Asad can play a major role in this. Syria must help us to convince Hamas to choose the voice of reason and peace." The regional media noted that Asad did not respond to Sarkozy's request, instead Asad said that the Israeli offensive in Gaza "must halt."

After the talks, President Asad and President Sarkozy held a joint press conference, where President Asad condemned continuing Israeli incursion citing the heaving casualties among Palestinian civilians. President Sarkozy sought to push Syria into playing a more constructive role:

"Syria can offer full contribution. Syria had already indicated that when it started indirect negotiations with Israel through the Turkish mediation. France, Turkey and Syria work on the same point and determination. We know you want peace, and Syria indicated that it works for peace as shown in Doha Agreement."

UN Security Council Resolution:

All Syrian papers reported that the UN Security Council Ministerial convened yesterday to debate an Arab resolution on Gaza. Coverage featured U.S. Ambassador to the UN Zalmay Khalilzad's statement in which he described a UN resolution imposing an immediate ceasefire in Gaza as "mere illusions." There was no additional coverage of the U.S. role or that of other Arab countries.

Israel's shelling of UNRWA Schools:

Papers condemned Israeli forces' shelling of Palestinian civilians in three UNRWA schools in the Gaza Strip that resulted in the killing of 50 Palestinians. Independent al-Watan quoted UNSYG Ban Ki Moon who described it "as unacceptable to all," saying that he warned Israeli authorities that these schools were used as shelters for homeless Palestinians." Al-Watan claimed that this massacre prompted a change in the U.S. position, mis-quoting State Department Spokesman as saying that "Washington seeks an immediate and sustainable ceasefire in Gaza...rather than a temporary and limited ceasefire."

HAMAS:

While Syrian papers completely ignored the visit to Cairo by a high ranking Hamas delegation to discuss a new ceasefire initiative in Gaza, regional papers focused on this story. Al Hayat reported that the Head of the Egyptian Intelligence Omar Suleiman told the Hamas delegation to recalibrate its demands to end the violence in Gaza. Syrian papers did, however, report on Khaled Mashaal's meeting in Damascus with a Jordanian "popular" delegation who came to express solidarity with the Palestinian people. Al-Watan also reported that while Venezuela expelled the Israeli Ambassador to Caracas, Egypt continued to prohibit Arab and European medical teams from using the Rafah crossing to deliver food and medicine to Gaza.

Obama's Reaction:

All papers reported carried U.S. President-elect Obama's statement in which he expressed concern over the mounting civilian casualties and that he would adhere to his campaign promise of engaging on the Middle East Peace Process.

Selected Editorial:

"Choices between Death and Resistance"

Samira Masalmeh, Chief Editor of government-owned Tishreen, commented (1/7): "What is required from the Palestinian resistance fighters after this bloodshed? Are they required to stop defending their land and people and surrender their arms to Israelis? What options are left to them?"

"Do they have to choose between slow death from starvation and siege, and quick death from the Israeli holocaust?"

"It seems that they have opted to die with dignity amid the silence of those who have no dignity..."

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